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SUBJECT: CENTRAL ASIAN WATER DISPUTES HEATING UP; PROSPECTS
FOR REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT WITH AFGHANISTAN

REF: ASHGABAT 486

Classified By: Charge Richard M. Miles, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. On April 16, Miroslav Jenca, the Head of Office of the Ashgabat-based UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, briefed Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher about the Center's work and conditions in the region. According to Jenca, the April 28 International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea meeting in Almaty will also include discussion about upstream water issues. Differences over water issues are heating up again in the region. The Uzbeks blocked transmission of Turkmen electricity to Tajikistan this winter in order to compel the Tajiks to sign a border agreement. While Afghanistan has legitimate claims to more Central Asian water, there are factors that weigh against pressing its claim. Later this year, the Preventive Diplomacy Center would like to organize an event focused on Central Asian engagement in Afghan reconstruction, with the aim of matching Afghan needs with concrete deliverables from its neighbors to the north. END SUMMARY.

ARAL SEA MEETING TO ADDRESS BROADER WATER ISSUES

¶2. (C) On April 16, Miroslav Jenca, the Head of Office of the Ashgabat-based UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia ("Preventive Diplomacy Center"), briefed Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher about the Center's work and conditions in the region. Jenca said the next regional event will be the April 28 International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea meeting in Almaty.

In addition to discussing the Aral Sea, participants will discuss regional water and related-energy issues such as the construction of upstream dams, as well as the implementation of the October 2008 agreement reached in Bishkek. The meeting, to be held at the level of deputy ministers and water management officials, is intended to provide a venue for discussion and will not produce a final document. It also will not address what will happen next winter, which will be handled instead at a meeting in the August-September timeframe. There has been no indication the countries want to work on a long-term solution to resolving their annual disputes related to water resource management.

WATER DISPUTES ARE HEATING UP

¶ 13. (C) Boucher mentioned that, in an earlier meeting (reftel), Turkmenistan Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov spoke bluntly about the need to take into account the interests of downstream countries. Jenca acknowledged that the water issue is "heating up" between Central Asian countries. He cited Russia's USD 1.7 billion commitment to build the Kambarata-1 hydroelectric project in Kyrgyzstan, which elicited a tough statement from the Uzbeks that "water issues would be decided among the countries in the region, not from outside." Jenca said the Turkmen position has also become tougher. While in the past, Turkmenistan followed Uzbekistan's lead on water issues, Meredov's remarks could be interpreted both as a message intended for Boucher to pass to the Tajiks, and as an indication that the Turkmenistan Government will be more assertive in its own right. Jenca commented that at regional meetings, quarrels normally break out among the participants, although officials refrained from quarreling at the Bishkek meeting, perhaps due to his presence.

WHY UZBEKS BLOCKED TURKMEN ELECTRICITY TO TAJIKISTAN

¶ 14. (C) Turkmenistan's part in the Bishkek agreement was to send electricity to Tajikistan. Jenca pointed out that this was not a new development. The Turkmen and Tajiks signed an electricity agreement two or three years ago, but transmission lines cross Uzbek territory and, at the beginning of each year, the Uzbeks cut the flow, as happened

again this year. In February, an understanding was reached between the Uzbeks and the Tajiks where the Tajiks agreed to ratify a border agreement in exchange for a resumption of the flow of electricity. Jenca mentioned that the border agreement covers 90-95 percent of the border, with the toughest sections left out and the Uzbeks refusing to discuss landmines in the border areas.

UPSTREAM-DOWNSTREAM TENSIONS

¶ 15. (C) Jenca said the Bishkek agreement's energy component focused on sending coal, gas and oil from downstream countries to the others, particularly Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan is more concerned about Kyrgyzstan than it is about Tajikistan because the Uzbeks rely on Kyrgyz water to supply the Syr Darya River. Tajik water only provides 25 percent of the Amu Darya's flow. The biggest Uzbek-Tajik issue is the Ragon dam project, about which the Tajiks are obsessed, but which, according to Jenca, the Uzbeks don't want to see completed. There are also the Santuda-1 and Santuda-2 projects being built with Russian and Iranian help, respectively. Iran is ready to support Tajikistan without taking Uzbekistan into account. Jenca also said that Uzbek-Tajik relations are a function of the personal relationship between Presidents Karimov and Rahmon. He did not see room for improvement.

INVOLVING AFGHANISTAN IN THE PROCESS

¶ 16. (C) According to Jenca, if Afghanistan is brought into discussions about water rights, they will make new demands on supply. The Afghans currently don't use their full entitlement and Afghan land near the Amu Darya will be suitable for agriculture once ruined irrigation works are restored. He suggested that the Central Asian countries have no incentive to involve Afghanistan in the water resource issue, since they have enough problems already. Nonetheless, the Preventive Diplomacy Center will push to bring Afghanistan into the process. There remains the question of how much Afghanistan will want to be involved. The Afghans currently get more water than they should from water resources shared with Iran. If they press their claims with the Central Asians, the Iranians might demand their due. In addition, Afghanistan needs roads, trade links and energy from Central Asia and might not want to create an obstacle.

¶ 17. (C) The Preventive Diplomacy Center focuses on resolving

regional water and related issues, in coordination with other UN agencies. The Center's second priority is Afghanistan. Jenca has begun planning an event to promote the engagement of Central Asian states in the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan. Jenca sought U.S. support. Boucher asked whether the outcome of the event would be practical measures such as connecting power grids and developing rail, road and other infrastructure links, or whether it would involve a more general discussion of how countries could help. Jenca didn't think another general discussion of the issue is needed, but rather agreement on concrete measures such as those mentioned, as well as capacity building activities in areas such as border control, customs, and agriculture. The overall concept would involve matching up ideas and resources in a practical way, drawing on Central Asian expertise.

TURKMEN ENERGY SECURITY CONFERENCE LACKS FOCUS

¶8. (C) Concerning the April 23-24 energy security conference hosted by the Turkmen, Jenca thought the government cares most about the public relations aspect of the event, and that the event lacks focus and a way forward. The draft statement was prepared without consultation with the UN and the notion of an eventual international convention on the issue should have been preceded by consultations with member states. When Jenca discussed the issue of a conference declaration with Foreign Minister Meredov, he suggested that a presidential statement would be an option if a declaration can't be

approved.

¶9. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher has cleared this cable.
MILES